

Interview with Charles Bohlen

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The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY CHARLES BOHLEN

Interviewed by: Paige Mulhollan, LBJ Library

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Q: Let's identify you, sir. You're Charles E. Bohlen, currently Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, and you have held this position since what date, sir?

BOHLEN: Since about the middle of February of this year [1968]. I came back on leave from Paris just about a year ago, and I was spending my leave very happily and quietly when I got word from Dean Rusk he wanted to see me in Washington. I came up from the eastern shore of Maryland, and Dean Rusk informed me that the President had decided that he wanted me to come back here to deal primarily with Russian affairs, which is in effect what I've done; although this job has other duties connected with it. It's the center point of liaison with the Pentagon on a working level and with CIA and with AEC. I'm also the State Department representative, or rather the substitute representative because in most cases there is a higher official involved, on the Space Council and on the Marine Council. So I have to deal with problems dealing with the sea bed, with matters affecting space, but then primarily my work has been in the Russian field. To prepare I was told by Secretary Rusk that when the President thinks about Russia there are only three names in the Department of State that he thought of; one was Lewellyn Thompson, who is presently Ambassador to Moscow; the other was Foy Kohler, who is retired and down in the University of Miami; and the third was myself. The two others were not available. I had

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gone to see President Johnson to pay my courtesy visit to him being an Ambassador back on leave in about the middle of November.

Q: You had served, immediately prior to this, as Ambassador to France during the entire time Mr. Johnson had been President?

BOHLEN: Yes, I was appointed by President Kennedy to France, and I got there in October 1962, and I was happily ensconced there, perfectly prepared and willing indeed to spend the rest of this Administration in Paris and then resign at the end of that in a suitable form of exit; but this was changed by the President's wish.

Q: Let's talk a little bit about the problems of your current position as Deputy Under Secretary. As you indicated, you're perhaps chiefly responsible for liaison with the Defense Department and others. There has been a great deal of discussion during Johnson's Presidency that the State Department has been pushed aside in the conduct of American foreign policy by the Defense Department and others. Do you think that's an accurate appraisal?

BOHLEN: I have seen no evidence of it since I have been back here. Now, of course, you've got to remember that the Vietnam affair has always been handled specially. The President is personally involved in that, all of the military dispositions don't fall within my purview at all. And I don't discuss Vietnam with the Pentagon or with the Joint Chiefs in any form, shape, or manner, because this as I say has required special handling. But as far as I can see the Department of State, which is in truth really personified by the Secretary of State, has been right in every single thing that I can see, that I have any knowledge of. The State Department is very heavily involved, and the relations with the Pentagon as far as I can see are excellent.

One of the advantages, you know, of having been around government for as long as I have is you tend to know people, and I know Paul Nitze very, very well indeed.

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And I know Clark Clifford, less well of course, but then I don't have many dealings with him; and I have a good deal of dealings with Paul Nitze; Dick Helms I've known for many years, I know him well and have great admiration for him. So it is advantageous to have been around here for quite awhile, and the first of March next year will be forty years since I joined this business.

Q: In 1929 in Prague was your first assignment, I think?

BOHLEN: My first assignment was in Prague in the fall of 1929. I left the United States just about two weeks or three weeks before the crash of 1929.

Q: That wasn't a bad time to leave, was it? In regard to the Defense Department, does the cooperation you talk about extend pretty well into the field at the mission level, the Embassy level?

BOHLEN: Oh, yes, when I was in Paris, for example, there was never any problem at all. We had excellent relations with all the military in France, and the attach#s have a special relationship, which is true all over the world. Attach#s are members of the Ambassador's staff, and as such are subject to his orders. Then of course, in France, when I arrived there, we had a considerable contingent of American forces. Well, they really were more logistic or air squadron forces, photography forces, but we had a number of bases in France, and these were closed down after President de Gaulle made his decision in March of 1966 that he wanted the American troops out. And I must say that that was a very impressive job that the American military did under President Johnson's orders—he gave the orders to carry this out and carry it out promptly and efficiently. And indeed it was. We got out of France with dispatch and dignity. It really, I think, impressed the French enormously that this so-called deadline which de Gaulle mentioned, which he really had no legal right to name or anything like that, was met with complete—.

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Q: There is no large number of cases of military personnel attached to Embassies who resist the orders of the Ambassador?

BOHLEN: Well, we had the regular setup of the attach# system which, as I say, has been well-defined and established for many, many years. And then you have EURCOM, which was completely out from under the Embassy, had nothing to do with it, which was the European Command American Army. And then, of course, during this period also you had the NATO Council there which was a military committee and all the appurtenances of the NATO. This was moved to Brussels in the fall of '67.

Q: You mentioned you haven't been engaged in consultation regarding Vietnam, so perhaps you haven't had a chance in this job to get into the difficulties of coordinating military policy with political policy.

BOHLEN: No, I haven't done this at all.

Q: Because we don't have a military policy going on in that area.

BOHLEN: I must say that under me here is a large section that is called GPM—G is a symbol for this office, PM is political-military affairs—headed by Phil Farley, who used to be number 2 in the NATO delegation to Harlan Cleveland in Paris, and who is a first-class officer. And he has a rather large group of people under him who really work in direct liaison with the Pentagon at all levels, and he is so good in his work that it's only very rarely that he has to bring a problem to me. I have supervisory responsibility over him, which makes it a very satisfactory form of work.

Q: Does military policy frequently create problems that involve other political decisions, such as arms sales? That's what comes to mind.

BOHLEN: Yes, that is an intricate subject, and it includes the problems of the U.S. arms sales which is handled by a special fellow—Henry Kuss over there in the Defense

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Department handles it. Occasionally it does involve some political problems. If you sell arms to one country and this worries another country which happens to have some sort of dispute with them. The classical illustration is India and Pakistan, and the fact that when it appears there are some American tanks, say, going to Pakistan, then they think we've engineered it, but sometimes we haven't, although I think we do have a residual responsibility for any arms that originate in the United States.

Q: Does the White House ever get involved in problems like that, where you get two different Departments with perhaps different points of view?

BOHLEN: Since I have been back, there hasn't been anything that I know of that has required White House solution over the dispute, but that certainly does happen. The White House was final arbiter of the whole thing.

Q: But I was driving toward whether or not you've encountered Mr. Johnson taking a position in this particular matter or not.

BOHLEN: No. I can't think of any instance since I have been back where President Johnson has had to take that sort of a position between the two contending Departments.

Q: What about the CIA? You mentioned them in addition to Defense?

BOHLEN: CIA and its relationship has been excellent. I know Dick Helms very well and I knew Rufus Taylor, who's over there as number two, and he calls me on the secure phone frequently about something, some particular problem or other. No, as a matter of fact, this job has been, as far as I can see, that the relationships have stayed with the various parts of the government seem to be in excellent order.

Q: That's good to hear. I'm afraid the State Department doesn't have a very good press sometimes.

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BOHLEN: Oh, well, the State Department never does. You just find out one thing. The State Department does not have a constituency in the United States politically.

Q: And that doesn't help them any in a lot of places.

BOHLEN: It has always been a natural whipping boy, and I suppose it always will. In the first place, since you've raised the subject, it doesn't have any constituency. By this I mean that it does not employ thousands of people the way the big Departments do all over the United States. Its operations are concentrated in Washington and abroad and nowhere else.

Secondly, since it deals with the foreigner, it is the State Department representative that has to go before Congress and in effect present the case for the foreign country which in their eye somehow makes them look as though they are proponents of the foreign position and not that of an American one. It is the way things inevitably work out, it doesn't have anything to do with any particular sympathy. But no one else is going to present, say, the case for any country you want to name. It's got to be made clear why they need this aid or why they need this military assistance and all this. And you have to sort of argue their case. Now, in general, you know, in any country where patriotism sometimes has a tinge of chauvinism in it, that anybody who does this is regarded as un-American, and this is the case particularly for the operation of this Department, where nine-tenths of its work is abroad.

Q: The claim that's frequently made when they talk about what has recently been called the "sad state of State," is, that it's unadministerable. Does this have some accuracy in it?

BOHLEN: Well, there's no doubt about it, the American system of separation of powers was not designed for the conduct of foreign affairs. It was designed for the conduct of non-foreign affairs, really. If you look at the Constitution and you really read the contemporary writings and opinions that are expressed, you can see that one of the great anxieties of

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the Founding Fathers, so-called, was that this young, struggling republic would get itself involved in foreign affairs before it was ready to do anything about it. And, therefore, a certain amount of safeguards were built in, but this was not the reason for the separation of powers, which was to avoid the concentration of too much power in too few hands. But it certainly has not been set up, as I say, for the conduct of foreign relations, and it sometimes has cost the American taxpayer a good deal of money because of the time that it takes to get measures through Congress. In a cabinet system of government, such as the British, the French, Germans—any of them have—as long as the government is in power, it is both legislative and executive.

Q: You are the number one career officer in the Department currently—.

BOHLEN: By the departure of others, I sort of automatically inherited that.

Q: Well, forty years, after all—.

BOHLEN: It's a long time.

Q: The feeling of the career officer, the morale, is frequently mentioned as a weakness of the current State Department. Is that an accurate assessment?

BOHLEN: Well, in a way it is. You see, the Foreign Service of the United States has grown so unbelievably in the last twenty years, and the requirements for admission are so high, and yet an awful lot of the work—I'd say fully 50-percent of the work in the Foreign Service abroad—is really routine work. And this is something that no one has licked. You've got to have high requirements to enter because any one of the young people coming in could rise to positions of responsibility. And when you're abroad, even a Vice Consul can do things that can harm or help the reputation and standing of the United States in a given country. But then when you get this high degree of qualifications, education and so forth, and then you have to apply them to really routine tasks, you get a certain amount of

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discontent. It's bad for morale. For example, when I joined the Foreign Service in 1929, the total officer corps of the Foreign Service, including Ministers and Ambassadors, was 732.

Q: What is it today?

BOHLEN: Now, there are 3,500 officers in the Foreign Service proper. I couldn't tell you how many there are in the USIA, or how many there are in AID, but certainly the total must run up around 7-8,000 at least. Now, they're not all competing in the same personnel system because the 3,500 are the ones who are really, so to speak, competing; but you can see the enormous increase in the broadening of the base, and this does create problems which have not yet been licked.

Q: Are the problems you are talking about here in career management type things—assignments, and so on?

BOHLEN: Yes, to some extent, and all this. And how do you deal with the whole problem of it. In other words, you've almost—some people think you've almost—got the creation of a Mexican army, with everybody a general. Everybody who is taken in has the educational basis and the character abilities theoretically to become the highest level you can get into, which I suppose would be an Ambassador to an important country. And yet, as I say, over 50-percent of the tasks that you perform, particularly in the earlier years, are very routine.

Q: Do Foreign Service Officers generally make career decisions, placement decisions, for other Foreign Service Officers? Or is that done by other people?

BOHLEN: Could be, it very often is a Foreign Service Officer, very often it isn't. The Bureau of Personnel—the personnel system is a very extensive one here—it's under the general overall direction of the Deputy Under Secretary for Administration who is a Foreign Service Officer. He was brought into the Foreign Service—I've forgotten—about ten years ago.

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Q: But there's no normal amount of tension between the Foreign Service Officers and the non- foreign service officers?

BOHLEN: I don't think so. This is one of the great theses of many people, and in 1956, I think it was, '55-'56, the so-called Wriston Report merged the Foreign Service Officers and the Home Service Officers which I think in the opinion of almost everybody in the Foreign Service, and still in my opinion, was a great mistake, for the reason that nine-tenths of the people who are in the Home Service don't want to go abroad; they are people who live in Washington and have gotten acquainted with the jungle of this town and know their way around; and they were sort of pushed into the Foreign Service. But anyway, this was done, and I don't really think it helped the Foreign Service as a whole.

Q: You were, back in the days toward the end of World War II, appointed as liaison officer for the State Department with the White House under President Truman. That sort of makes you an early forerunner of what's now called the Rostow Operation. Were you analogous in some ways?

BOHLEN: Not at all. I had an office over here and an office in the White House. I was just strictly a liaison officer working with President Roosevelt and then President Truman; but President Truman had a different idea of the function of things. When Jimmy Byrnes became Secretary of State, then this whole thing just disappeared. But I think it was important when Roosevelt and Hopkins were around. Harry Hopkins was the one that set it up.

Q: Yes, sir. You didn't have, though, a policy role such as presumably Rostow does.

BOHLEN: Not particularly, no. Anyway, we are getting pretty far from Johnson on this thing.

Q: Well, no, I'll get back to it here. I'm not trying to preempt your material here. I was driving toward this—the growth of this sort of new agency in national security affairs,

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advisory staff in the White House, which started under Kennedy and has expanded or perhaps changed in some ways under Johnson. How does this relate to the State Department in accomplishing its task?

BOHLEN: Well, I wasn't here, you see, except for a year. I was here when Kennedy came in in '61, and I stayed on until about a year-and-a-half and had an opportunity to see it because the man who headed it up, who was sort of a foreign affairs or security officer of the White House was McGeorge Bundy, who was a remarkable man, I think, and a very sensible one. And I think he saw all of the dangers of his job which could have been to encroach on the State Department's prerogatives, but as far as I could see—and I knew him very well and had a great deal of business with him when I was here before—he was successful in avoiding this sort of stuff. This was not always true of some of the others over there. I don't want to name any names, but there was in the group—

Q: You're welcome to name any names. I'd just be delighted for you to.

BOHLEN: No, I don't particularly want to name any names. But there were some of them who were sort of new and eager and a little bit swollen with their own importance by being in the White House. This is one of the problems that you get in almost every new Administration. One of the things was that the Kennedy Administration was differently organized than its predecessor, President Eisenhower. But let me state here that during Eisenhower's Administrations, I was abroad almost the whole time—I was in Moscow, went out to Moscow in April 1953, or at least I arrived there in April 1953; and then I went from there to the Philippines and came back and was here in the Department for about a year with Christian Herter, then Secretary of State.

Q: So you think the same thing is true of the Rostow operation as was true with the Bundy one before it—that is, of trying not to impose—

BOHLEN: Yes, I don't get the idea that Walt Rostow encroaches at all on Defense's prerogatives. I think Dean Rusk, of course, has established himself a position in the whole

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governmental setup. It seems to me that you don't see any signs of them trying to push the Department of State around with Rusk. Of course Rusk, whom I have the greatest admiration for, I knew him when he was here before with General Marshall, and even his best friend would not claim for him a great administrative ability. He's not interested in the administration of the Department of State, but he himself has a very high standing in the Administration; and it seems to me that he handles all of his problems with the White House and all that—that level of foreign policy—in a very, very excellent way.

Q: Again you'll accuse me of getting away from Johnson, but it has a lot to do with the Foreign Service under Johnson and before as well. You yourself were one of the victims of the attacks that have been made on the Americanism in McCarthy times.

BOHLEN: McCarthy was a product of sixteen years of being out of office. This is what it was. And therefore McCarthy came along—and there's no point, he's dead now, so let him stay in his grave—but this was a purely sort of a opportunistic—I mean he didn't have any deep conviction on this stuff about Communism in government. The story that I believe to be true was that there was a luncheon held across from the Mayflower Hotel at which there was a Catholic priest, a fired correspondent from the old Times Herald in Washington, and somebody else, and McCarthy. And McCarthy was complaining of the fact that he'd been 10 years, something like that, in the Senate and hadn't made a name for himself, at all, and somebody mentioned the fact that Communists in government was a good thesis, and the correspondent offered to write him a speech to be delivered in Wheeling, West Virginia, which he did.

Q: Right. That's the start of it. In 1950.

BOHLEN: And it grew and it grew and it grew, and as I say, part of it—the reason that he got a certain amount of support from the Republican Party is that the Republican Party was just avid for power at that time. And the country for the first time in history was a little bit scared by the fact that you could have war with a country that could reach you, namely

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the Soviet Union. And then the discovery of a number of Communists in government all fed this thing. And for the first time in the history of the United States the people felt alarmed. And this is what produced this disagreeable and very unfortunate aberration known as McCarthyism because I think we're still living with some of the consequences.

Q: That was my next question. You're anticipating me.

BOHLEN: I know from some of my children that it is apparently, it's considered a rebirth of McCarthyism to even discuss the Communist problem as such in many universities.

Q: Just automatically, if it's brought up—

BOHLEN: If you talk about that there is such a thing as a Communist menace and the Soviet Union, then it's known as McCarthyism.

Q: Do you think that McCarthyism did have a long-term effect on the State Department and upon Foreign Service particularly?

BOHLEN: I would say no. I wouldn't say it had a long-term effect. I think it had much more an effect over the period on the national consciousness, particularly in the academic world because that was one of his targets, you know; he was always after professors. I think this had a certain effect. I remember telling Senator [Karl] Mundt [RSD.] at the time when the McCarthy thing was on, saying, you know, this thing is going to make it impossible for us to do any serious job of analysis of the Communist problem. It's going to so sicken the people when they turn against McCarthy on the idea that it's going to make anything that's anti-Communist very discredited.

Q: But the departure of a great number of Foreign Service Officers in the long run— ?

BOHLEN: There were some victims. There were some very, very bad cases of rank injustices that were done, I think, due to McCarthy. One of them, of course, is John Davies, who used to be one of the best Foreign Service Officers we had. But because

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of the pressures of the time and things like that, he was let go—not on any grounds of disloyalty but simply on the grounds of that they called “bad judgment” about China. But damn it, all of the judgments seemed to be accurate. He said that the Communists, the way things stood in China, were going to win their fight, and they did.

Q: Penalty for being right about an unpleasant truth.

BOHLEN: He was not the only one.

Q: The attack on you at the time, particularly in the Senate—

BOHLEN: Was because I had been at Yalta.

Q: And a lot of Senators involved were leading Republicans including some who were fairly close associates of Mr. Johnson, who was Minority Leader at the time. Do you remember him taking any role in that at all?

BOHLEN: No, he didn't. He was a straight Democrat. He went right down the line. He wasn't on the Foreign Relations Committee. He had no direct involvement in it. No, these were Senators who really got—McCarthy was behind this. And they had been dining out on the iniquities of Yalta. Then when I got up before the committee and was asked questions about it, I told them what I thought about it—that there were no iniquities at Yalta. And this upset some of them a little.

Q: And can still upset some of them, I think, or those who are still around.

BOHLEN: Well, that has died out a lot. A very funny thing—the Republicans in thinking that they would find an enormous payday to discredit the Roosevelt Administration, rushed the publication of the Yalta papers, I don't know, several years ahead of the normal date.

Q: Oh, much ahead, yes.

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BOHLEN: You know, when it came out, it was the wettest [indistinguishable word] you have ever seen. There wasn't a Goddamn thing in it that was discreditable at all. If and when I write a book, which I think I probably will when I get out of here, a large part of it will deal with proceedings and what really happened at Yalta, although it's all in the thing that was published.

Q: You went to Russia, as you said, in April 1957. Just out of curiosity really, what was the Russian reaction to McCarthyism?

BOHLEN: They were very much against it, at least publicly. It was too easy a thing, and they thought the United States was going fascist and all this sort of stuff. You've always got to remember that the Russians—we had been public enemy number one as far as Soviet propaganda has been concerned ever since about June 1944, and that this is part of the normal procedure. They would never give the U.S. a favorable break ever, and they still don't. We are the chief opponent of what they are trying to do, although often what they are trying to do is not what they profess to be trying to do in the sense that they are a Communist country, that is to say, they are run by a Communist party; and ideology still plays an enormous part in their—but not as much in their foreign affairs, as much as one might think. It's a very complicated subject, and I don't want to get into it. I'll save that for my book.

Q: You mentioned the importance of Yalta, and of course it will be a major part of any work you write. What about the general topic, and Mr. Johnson has been involved in this, of summitry? You've probably been at more summit conferences than anybody alive.

BOHLEN: Well, I know. The Secretary of State wrote an article for Foreign Affairs before he was Secretary of State in which he disapproved of summitry.

He said it was a bad way of doing business, and it is a bad way of doing business. And naturally anybody who has been in this business as long as I have, you develop some

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professional distortions, if you want to call it that, or perhaps experience and knowledge of things a little better than you might if you didn't have it. And certainly the orderly processes of diplomacy would best be carried out by your Ambassadors and by the quiet processes. But given the nature of the Soviet structure where only the very top can make decisions, can do anything, I think summitry is inevitable.

Q: In spite of the preference of other ways.

BOHLEN: The difficulty is, and any Western leader ought to be fully aware of it, the fact that you have a free public opinion in your own country means that you are under a certain amount of disability when you meet with a dictator who doesn't have the same problem. Because it's very much harder for a Western President, for example, coming from our society or from that of any of the democratic societies in Western Europe, to have a meeting that's a failure. There's always the temptation to try to reach some form of agreement; the dictator doesn't have that at all. But simply because the Soviet structure is built that way, there's not much point in trying to do business, say, with [Andrei] Gromyko, whereas you can occasionally with Kosygin. This was truer in the days of Stalin than I think it is now when you really have a collective leadership.

Q: Does the personality compatibility or incompatibility sometimes loom very important?

BOHLEN: Very little. I think it can work in a negative sense if some guy, if there were really a personality clash, if they just disliked each other instinctively, why this would hamper business; but by and large the Bolsheviks are very impersonal in their dealings. Now, let's get back to Mr. Johnson, for goodness sake!

Q: I'm coming back right here. For example, do you have insight into Mr. Johnson's personal relations with the world leaders?

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BOHLEN: No, I really don't. I have not seen Mr. Johnson very much since I have been back here. It just hasn't come about that way. He does all his dealings with the Department of State, as it is quite proper, through the Secretary of State.

I think I first met Mr. Johnson when he was a Senator. He was Majority Leader. I can't remember if it was late—whether it was before that in the late '40's, or whether it was in the '50's.

Q: It was in the '50's when he was Majority Leader.

BOHLEN: Yes, the '50's when he was Majority Leader; I'm sure that's when I met him. The first time I really was associated with him was in 1961 when President Kennedy called me up and asked me if I would go to Berlin with the Vice President who he was sending over there to the building of the wall. And we rushed over there in a relatively hurried trip. And there I saw him continuously for about 48 hours, maybe a little more. I must say he was a very impressive man when he was on this because he was having to project his personality to the people of Berlin, and it was very well received, what he had to say was well received; and there were some moving moments when a new and additional American contingent was coming into Berlin along the Autobahn Road and he went out to the edge of Berlin to meet them. And it must have been goodness knows how many thousands of people all along the road, hundreds of thousands really, and it was very moving when he met the commanding American officer in there and then we had a dinner at the Mayor's. And the Mayor then was Willy Brandt, who is now Foreign Secretary.

Q: There has been some criticism of Mr. Johnson on his personal relations on trips like that. But you found him effective?

BOHLEN: I found him very effective. But of course you didn't have very much chance to do it. We jumped in a plane and flew overnight and got to Berlin and then spent the whole day and night there and took off at 4 a.m. the next morning and came on back here, so

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you might call it fairly rapid. But I remember the enormous vitality of the man, that he was sitting up reminiscing in the plane with the correspondents who were with us about his Senate days, and he did that steadily from Berlin—about 4 a.m. in the morning—until we got to Shannon in Ireland, which was about three hours.

Q: Still going at that hour?

BOHLEN: Oh, yes, enormous.

Q: Some critics have dated the difficulties that the United States has had with France during Johnson's Presidency to the meeting that he had with de Gaulle at the Kennedy funeral.

BOHLEN: Oh, no, that had nothing whatsoever to do with it. It was already far advanced. This is a whole other story—the question of why de Gaulle behaves the way he does. I think these are convictions de Gaulle has had, and I think you will find in his early writings, he believed in France as a country that had a special position in the world. And that France—the only way that you could make yourself effective unless you have the physical power which France has not got—is to be totally independent. And I don't think that his meeting with Johnson had anything to do with it at all. In fact, every time I used to see de Gaulle, and I saw quite a lot of him relatively speaking—when I was in France, I used to see him about once every two or three months, as a matter of purpose, I didn't have anything particularly to take up with him, just to have a run around on the situations, and he always used to express admiration for president Johnson; always asked me to transmit to him his highest regard. The misunderstanding that occurred over Kennedy's funeral was one of these things that could happen to anybody, because President Johnson said to de Gaulle that, “I look forward to seeing you on the visit that had been arranged between you and President Kennedy.” And de Gaulle replied, “This is a matter to be arranged.” And de Gaulle really meant that this was a matter to be renegotiated, something like that, and Johnson quite understandably interpreted what he said to mean the details—the date, the

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place, and all that—and he told that to a group of governors who had come to the funeral, and this got back to the French. And [Herve] Alphand, the Ambassador, rushed around to tell people that it was wrong.

Q: But this didn't have any long influence on policy?

BOHLEN: Heavens no! De Gaulle's attitude had been fixed since God knows when, but he never changed it. He really believed that foreign affairs are sort of like the relationship between planets, big planets have big gravitational pull, and medium size planets had bloody well better stay out of it.

Q: After Mr. Johnson then became President, was there a notable change which was discernible to you as Ambassador to France in the policy the United States to Europe as compared to Kennedy's policy?

BOHLEN: No. Of course Kennedy visited France. I was with him when he went to France in the spring of '61. And he talked to de Gaulle. But by the time the end—just before the assassination—Kennedy had a very clear idea of what the nature of the problem was and how little you could do about it. And he set the tone which President Johnson followed and followed with great skill, I think, which was not to get drawn by de Gaulle, not to get into polemics with him, not to make statements, not to go into this sort of stuff. He expressed it as “too bad,” and this made it possible for me and France to carry on in the same basis, and in other words not stir up more trouble than existed and not let the differences with de Gaulle and with de Gaulle's government really affect the basic element of Franco-American friendship which as far as I can see still remains.

Q: What about specific initiatives, such as—well, the big one of the time was the multilateral force?

BOHLEN: Well, I didn't get in on that, and France wasn't involved. You see, because right off France made it plain that they were not going to have any part of it. And it was only

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later on when they realized that this thing might have gone on, and were terribly concerned about the German involvement in it, that they began to come out against it. By that time, however, the British were against it and all sorts of things were working against it. It seems to me to have been a rather dubious idea in many respects because it seemed to give the United States a veto power over the use of whatever nuclear power any individual European country had, and England was the only one, without giving them any veto power over U.S. use. It seemed very unequal. But it possibly might have worked and we might have solved some of these atomic problems in the Alliance which still remain a problem. We've never found a solution for it.

Q: But Mr. Johnson's withdrawal ultimately of the MLF idea would have been favorably viewed in France, for example.

BOHLEN: Yes, oh, yes. Because they were afraid that this was going to turn into an American-German sort of association in the nuclear field.

Q: What about Mr. Johnson's continued claim, or the Administration's continued claim, that NATO without France is still an effective military alliance?

BOHLEN: Well, it still is, because the really effective thing is the United States. You see, France hasn't got much military power either, one way or another. And France is still in the Alliance, but not in the organization. Of course, the invasion of Czechoslovakia gave it a certain amount of a new shot in the arm.

Q: In that line, mentioning Czechoslovakia brings in your particular specialty, advising on Russian affairs. What has generally been the reaction of Russia to Mr. Johnson's intent, which he has restated over and over again, to increase the detente degree during the time he has been President?

BOHLEN: I think they notice this. The Russians—they prefer to have people, sort of working and trying to get along with them, than to have a blast of cold war stuff going on.

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I think they have perfectly good regard for Mr. Johnson as President of the United States. They naturally have built up Kennedy a little more than they would if he had remained alive as President, but then this is a—you see, the Russians are well aware that the purposes of the United States and what the purposes must be and those of the Soviet Union which stem from the system that is set up in Russia are really not compatible. But there is one thing that I think that is accepted by both sides and that is the total impossibility of having a nuclear war.

Q: Do the Russian leaders know Mr. Johnson personally?

BOHLEN: Well, they met at Glassboro.

Q: Did you attend Glassboro?

BOHLEN: No, I was in France.

Q: You were still in France then. You don't have any insights then into their personal relationship with Mr. Johnson?

BOHLEN: No, I never observed it. But they respect the Presidency of the United States, because they realize it is a position of great power and enormous influence.

Q: I almost hesitate now to go back to Yalta as a frame of reference here. You've cautioned me about it-

BOHLEN: I'm just trying not to do something that isn't in your terms, or in the stated terms—this is for the Johnson papers. But I understand.

Q: I'll get to it here in a kind of left-handed way. What you said about Yalta publicly at the time of your appointment as Ambassador to Moscow, that it was not the settlements at Yalta but the Russian violation of them, that caused problems in the post-war world.

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BOHLEN: Yalta had nothing to do with sort of freezing the Eastern Europe in Russian hands. This is where the Red Army moved certain places. The agreement at Yalta merely confirmed the zonal agreements, and the only change it made was the allocation of a zone to France and a seat for France on the control council of Germany. This had nothing to do with the division of Europe which is the big question that remains unsolved and will remain unsolved as long as the Soviet Union exists in its present form. This was the imposition on these countries on the Soviet form of government.

Q: In Mr. Johnson's time as President, there has been a group of scholars sometimes referred to as the New Left or the Revisionists, and there are revisionists for every episode. These people have argued that it was the American overreaction to certain things after 1945 that exacerbated the Cold War. I take it you disagree with that.

BOHLEN: This is perfect nonsense. I never read anything—it's just a sign that certain scholars always want to find a new angle, a new slant to anything. This had nothing whatsoever to do with the imposition of the Soviet system in Eastern Europe which was done by the Soviets in various degrees—in Czechoslovakia it was done in 1948; in Hungary it came along a little earlier or later; in Bulgaria, all these things are perfectly clear—Romania was done long before there was any U.S. reaction to anything. This is really, I think, a very strained interpretation of the events.

The only place that the Russians could have done it and didn't do it was in Finland, and there perfectly clearly they didn't do it because they realized that Finland was just a little bit too tough a nut to crack, that there would be a lot of trouble, that there would be guerrilla warfare. In fact, Stalin said that once in a conversation with Churchill. He said, "You cannot but admire people who would be willing to fight for their country the way the Finns have." And this has nothing to do with the reaction of the United States towards—There was no NATO at all when Czechoslovakia was taken over by the Communists.

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Well, now, they go as far as to argue that we exaggerated the degree of aggressiveness of Russia after World War II. Is that a tenable argument? Well, I don't know if you could be much more aggressive. Obviously no one thought that the Russians were prepared to go to war. In correspondence between the Central Committee of the Communist party of the Soviet Union and Tito, you'll see a statement that we couldn't use the Red Army to help enforce Communism in France and Italy because it would have meant a war with the United States. This was the statement of the Soviets. And I really haven't read many of these books. I think it would make me too mad.

Well, they're just beginning to come out and they are obviously written out of the framework of Vietnam, I think. But is apparently going to be a field of scholarship that those of you who went through those years and have expert knowledge are going to have to deal with.

Don't worry. As soon as I get out of the government I'll be very active in encountering these theories because they are just plain untrue. I went through this whole period there, the very beginning of it, the first meeting with the Russians, continuous all the way through, and I saw a series of American attempts to really find some Basis with the Soviet Union and that every time we were thrown for a loss because the system is impenetrable.

Q: I see. How would you estimate, out of your long experience, Mr. Johnson as a foreign policy leader?

BOHLEN: Here you get into a very different thing; there's no doubt about it but that the Vietnamese thing—he inherited it, he did not start it, he inherited it, it came all the way down from Eisenhower through Kennedy. And the beginning in the increase of troops, it was done under President Kennedy, and so I don't think in any way you can blame—if I can use that term—Johnson for the initiation of the Vietnamese War. It had just turned into active U.S. participation there. My personal opinion is, and I haven't been in the whole act so perhaps I'm not qualified to talk about it, is that we took on something that was a little

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more than we could really handle correctly, simply because of the limitations imposed on our actions by our own civilization and our own thoughts and the nature of guerrilla warfare is something that we were not particularly trained or equipped to handle. And I think you can't tell—you will have to wait until the whole thing is over to make any judgment on it, before you could whether it was— Certainly you have—the reality of the impulse that put us in there was a perfectly sound one. It didn't have any overtones of imperialism or desire to acquire military positions or anything like that. It was simply to defend the right of a small, weak, ineffective in a sense, government, to really get the people to choose their own fate for them and not have it imposed on them by armed action from without.

Q: Why do you think it has been so difficult to explain this, not just to the general public but to a substantial portion of the informed political community?

BOHLEN: Well, I think one of the reasons is that the United States had really a very short time to develop a national consciousness as to what world involvement meant. What are the prices that you pay for being in the world? We'd had a hundred seventy years or so of isolationism where we could stand back and take extreme positions criticizing others without being in the game. When you are in the game, it requires a certain understanding of the fact that you are not going to win every bout, that you are not going to have 100-percent total success every time you turn around. Sometimes it is going to be bloody and long and onerous, as it is in Vietnam. Also, the fact that this is impossible to relate to the security of the United States. You see, we are a great big country, they are a little country and whatever it is, how many thousands of miles away— 8,000 miles away from us—and it is very, very complicated—it requires a certain amount of sophisticated understanding of what a Communist system does. This domino theory which is very much discredited now is not really very untrue at all. Engels once said that the trouble with a military frontier is one 100 kilometers farther out is preferable, and this is the same thing for us as for the Communists. When you get a Communist thing here or there, this is the frontier of the clash with the non-Communist world; and if you move it out each step it goes farther.

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Q: Do you think the analogies between Asian aggression then hold to European aggression that occurred in the time that you were there?

BOHLEN: Well, I don't think you can make quite the analogy with Hitler that you make with the Communists because it was a different proposition entirely. Certainly in all these weak, sort of shaky countries in Eastern Asia, if we had not really done what we did in Vietnam I don't know what would have happened. It's very difficult for me to see that Indonesia would be turned against the Communists the way they did. And in all of them I think the tide would be running that way.

Q: What do you think, if there is one that you can pick out, has been Mr. Johnson's chief weakness as a foreign policy leader?

BOHLEN: I don't really know what his chief weakness is. I think it is perhaps his apparently rather strong desire for secrecy. It has been detrimental to him in his dealings with the press and the public, the fact that he has created the impression of being a sort of a contriver, a wheeler-dealer, stuff like that. I don't know whether I can judge him from just what you hear and read in the press, and stuff like that. This so-called credibility gap is largely a lot of nonsense but on the other hand, the very fact that you can use this is one of the impressions. But I don't think he has ever had any sort of unworthy ambitions or unworthy aims at all. I think that he has done more than any President in the field of race relationships and domestic things. I think it's only tragic that this damned Vietnamese thing took so much of his time and energy and so much money and all this sort of stuff as to really take it away from what I know he would want to do which would really be to deal with the domestic problems in the United States.

Q: Do you think it is possible within the system we have to educate public opinion? You mentioned a couple of times the shortness of time to get used to our responsibilities, and so on.

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BOHLEN: I don't know. I think it is going to take a very long time and everything goes so much quicker now. Of course, it ought to be quicker. But the point is that most countries that rose to an eminent position in the world had generations, even centuries, to become accustomed to it—like Great Britain, for example. But we really had this dumped on us since 1947, is when it happened, when the British revealed that they did not have the strength left to play the role, and they asked and we had to pick it up. And this decision was made at the time of the Greek-Turkish thing. But that was not a provocative decision on our part?

I don't think so at all. It was a question of saving Greece and saving Turkey. The Russians obviously—at that time they had an open claim to two provinces of Turkey and there was a civil war going on in Greece.

I don't know what these revisionists would have us do. One thing that they ought to remember is that there has never been a recorded case where the majority of the people ever voted the Communist regime in power.

Q: Right.

BOHLEN: And also that Communism is a room with no exit. None have ever been able to overcome it. Well, I think we've covered enough ground.

Q: I was going to say, is there anything you'd like to add, just in the way of an open-ended —?

BOHLEN: No, the only thing I can say is that I have not had the pleasure of seeing Mr. Johnson very much since he has been President, but I do know from people that have dealt with him, like Rusk particularly, whom I know very well indeed, have unbounded admiration for his courage and his steadfastness and purpose, and this sort of stuff.

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Every President has his own characteristics, and I think one of the difficulties of President Johnson was to come after such a President as John F. Kennedy to whom I was personally devoted. And he brought a whole new breath of change, a different thing. He was young, he was attractive, and it was very difficult for the President who comes after him, particularly in the sort of deification that occurred after his assassination. Sir, I think you very much for your patience. I appreciate it. Thank you.

End of interview